

# Learning by Teaching at the University

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*By Jodi Daniel Skinner (Germany)*

What's the best way to motivate listless, uninterested students? Simply turn them into teachers! The technique practiced at several schools and universities, most notably at St. John's College in Annapolis, USA, and at more and more grammar schools in Germany, is called Learning by Teaching; it requires a radical shift in the traditional roles of teacher and learner. The results are overwhelmingly positive, especially in the field of foreign-language instruction.

Learning by teaching is by no means an exclusively modern didactic method. Seneca wrote 2,000 years ago: "Docendo discimus" (We learn by teaching). At St. John's College students teach each other philosophy and physics, ancient Greek and the integral calculus by using the "Great Books"-the original works of Euclid, Shakespeare, Newton, and Freud. There are no textbooks and no professors; the "tutors," as they are modestly called, see themselves as guides who know what questions to ask and, more importantly, know when to listen. St. John's students are not extraordinarily brilliant, but they are extremely motivated and critical. By the end of the first semester at the latest, they realize that they themselves are responsible for the quality of the seminars and tutorials.

Surely one cannot expect the average student who is used to being spoon-fed at school to suddenly take upon himself the responsibility for his education! While not every institution of higher learning can make the demands on students that St. John's does, every foreign-language class can profitably use the methods of learning by teaching, as Dr. Jean-Pol Martin at the University of Eichstätt in Germany has proved.

Dr. Martin has done considerable research on a teaching technique he developed and named "Lernen durch Lehren" (Learning through Teaching). He began by assigning German pupils in his secondary-school French classes small tasks such as asking in French for volunteers to complete exercises. The pupils already knew the expressions in French needed to complete these assignments and were speaking simple French to each other instead of passively responding to the teacher. Dr. Martin found that by turning the pupils into teachers, he dramatically increased their motivation. They not only spoke far more in each class, but by working together they also overcame their inhibitions more quickly. A feeling of solidarity developed, the division of the class into an authority (the teacher) and a passive audience (the students) evaporated. The teacher remained, of course, the final expert and could always interrupt and correct. However, the pupils assumed many of the other tasks formerly carried out routinely and unnecessarily by the instructor.

For teachers who enjoy exerting a role of authority and hearing themselves talk, this method requires, of course, a tremendous adjustment. The necessary energy and patience can be rewarded, however, by an astounding increase in motivation and efficiency on the part of the pupils.

The philosophy of a St. John's education and the idea behind Dr. Martin's didactic method can also be applied to university-level courses of practically all sizes and subjects. As a concrete example, I would like to describe my experiences in a practical language course in English for German university students.

## **A Practical Example**

The Basic and Advanced Courses in English serve to deepen and expand students' vocabulary and to improve reading and listening comprehension. The 15 to 20 students divide themselves into four or five groups at the beginning of the semester. During the first two classes I introduce the course goals and show how a short story, essay, or magazine article can be used to expand vocabulary or to test reading and listening comprehension. The golden rule for both my presentation and the classes led by students is: Don't be boring!

After the first two weeks the students begin to plan and lead each class. They can select any text from two or three anthologies of short stories, essays, and articles that I have provided at the beginning of the semester. The students are absolutely free to choose the material they wish to use. Some of the short stories have exercises included; the texts are of varying difficulty and have a wide range of topics. The students who do not know which exercises to use or are not sure that their handouts have been correctly written can of course always contact me for ideas, suggestions, and corrections.

The students have between 45 minutes and one hour to introduce the story or essay they have chosen and to do the relevant vocabulary and comprehension exercises with their fellow students. I refrain from interrupting or commenting until the final half-hour, during which I correct the mistakes made in grammar and word choice in addition to leading a discussion on the various strategies the teaching team used.

Finally, I grade the student instruction on the basis of several important criteria. Did the student-teachers maintain the interest of all their students? The usual lecture method of teaching is not encouraged, since this kind of instruction tends to make passive listeners of the students, who should be actively involved. Was the content of the chosen text adequately and comprehensively presented? Did the team teachers use varied and interesting exercises to explain vocabulary items?

The student-instructors must then develop a test that deals with the contents of the story or essay, the new vocabulary, and, if relevant, the grammar points covered in the lesson. Having to devise a fair and comprehensive test is an effective way to force the new teachers to think about what exactly they wanted to get across to their students.

## **An Enthusiastic Response**

At the beginning of the semester the students are naturally hesitant and uncertain, but they assume their new roles quickly and speak much more English per class than before. Since all the students know that they will also have their turn as teachers, they are understanding and

supportive of the others. Of course, the students have to spend far more time preparing for this new type of class than for the traditional lectures, but they do just that willingly and with enthusiasm. Not only do they learn and practice far more English; they also develop the skill of communicating information to a group, a skill that is required more and more urgently in today's society. In addition, they begin to learn to think critically and independently. This important intellectual ability is, after all, the goal of all university study.

My students have responded with overwhelming enthusiasm to the Learning-by-Teaching method. Of course, I have had to adjust my role as teacher, have had to learn when to keep quiet and how to listen more carefully. The satisfaction I gain from having become a partner in learning and not just a dispenser of information is priceless and has made the classroom experience a joy for both me and my students.